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## **Belonging In Time: Australian Women Playwrights in a Changing Landscape'**

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## Belonging in Time: Australian Women Playwrights in a Changing Landscape

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**Abstract:** This paper considers time: the way each moment holds in it the seeds of the past as well as hopes for the future.

In 2005 Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney wrote *The Dolls' Revolution* as a celebration of women playwrights whose contributions to Australian theatre between the 1990s and 2000s had reshaped Australian cultural perspectives. Yet, in 2012, The Australia Council for the Arts released a report, 'Women in Theatre', documenting the diminished state of the representation and support of women in key creative roles in major Australian theatre companies. Following the recommendations of the report this paper charts the inclusion of women's plays in a set of major Sydney theatres' 2016 programs.

Given this changing landscape, this paper considers how phenomenological concepts of temporality can contribute to understanding experiences of belonging in a community. The complexity of belonging or not belonging, of being included in or excluded from, of feeling acceptance or rejection is framed here, with particular reference to the staging of the work of Australian women playwrights, through Husserlian and Heideggerian philosophies. Time for both Husserl and Heidegger is a three-dimensional experience of each 'now', containing the past and the future as well as the present. Unconscious participation in all three in any moment creates a pattern of subjective presence and absence. Belonging is experienced as mind/bodies are 'thrown' into time with pre-existing backgrounds of competency and familiarity shaping expectations of the future.

**Key words:** phenomenology, temporality, feminism, women playwrights, Australia, Australia Council

Most of us when we think of Time think of it as a measurement. For instance, we think, 'Have I got enough time to do this?' or 'I have to get here or there by that time'. Or 'What time is it now?' Phenomenologists however have always considered Time as an experience. In fact Edmund Husserl, who could be considered as the father of phenomenology regarded Time as 'the basic form of all experience' (Dostal 1993, p. 145). In this paper I want to consider the experience of Time, of Edmund Husserl's and Martin Heidegger's phenomenological regard for Time and how these relate to belonging, where belonging can be understood as, the act of 'being part of something, being a natural member of, being accepted' (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2016). I have often thought of those exceptional artists who have worked extensively and expressively throughout their lives to be recognized publicly only after their deaths: Van Gogh, Herman Melville, Franz Kafka, Johann Sebastian Bach.

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Time clearly played a crucial part in their experience as artists and presumably in the sense of identity of belonging to the artistic field they had chosen. Their sense of belonging to an artistic community or not belonging was surely influenced by the recognition or lack of recognition of their artistic work!

The artistic community I want to consider in this paper is that of Australian women playwrights. It is a community that I have been engaged with for several decades, for when I first arrived at the University for Wollongong in the early 1990s, to work as a practitioner within the Theatre program, there was not one Australian woman playwright included in the dramaturgy course's study list. Not one. I wondered then how the many Australian women playwrights, whose work I was well aware of, felt about academies that didn't recognize their hard earned writing skills. I made it my conscious decision then to choose to produce and direct plays by women, primarily Australian women.

From 1985 until its demise in 2006, Playworks operated as the Australian national women's performance writing network, promoting Australian women's writing for theatre and performance through workshopping, dialoguing, and critiquing. In 1996 Playworks published *Telling Time* (Baxter 1996), celebrating ten years of the organization's work. The names of the Australian playwrights included in the publication and the names of the participants at the tenth birthday festival, which *Telling Time* documents, read like a who's who of the community of women writing for and promoting women in performance from across Australia in the 1990s — Alma De Groen, Katherine Thomson, Tobsha Learner, Jennifer Compton, Jenny Kemp — just to name a few. The vibrancy of this community jumps out at every page reflecting Jane Goodall's description of the original ten year festival as a 'true festival — exuberant, celebratory and with a great spirit of collective affirmation' (Baxter 1996, p. 1). Jane O'Sullivan in reviewing *Telling Time* underscores a pertinent aspect of the publication in that it 'offer[s] insights into the struggle to achieve equal representation, and access to the means of (self) production, in an industry in which the production of articulate representations is of the essence' (O'Sullivan 1998, p. 148). O'Sullivan reflects a feedback loop, where recognition in the theatre industry hinges on representation in that industry to create a sense of belonging. In this case, these women were fighting to enable a witnessing of themselves as writers and performance makers beyond the circle of their feminist followers, and advocates, to, as O' Sullivan observes, 'register creative and intellectual expressions of women, in all their unity and difference' (O'Sullivan 1998, p. 149).

These notions of 'collective affirmation' and 'articulate representation' for Australian women playwrights are heralded again in another milestone publication for both Australian women playwrights and directors, *The Doll's Revolution: Australian Theatre and Cultural Imagination*. Published in 2005, Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney claim that a group of women theatre artists created a theatrical revolution, through 'feminist agency' to enable 'an imaginative rethinking of Australian culture' (Fensham & Varney 2005, p. 9). It is worthwhile noting that two of the five major playwrights analyzed by Fensham and Varney, Katherine Thomson and Jenny Kemp are represented in *Telling Time*, where due to the diarized form of their writing there they offer insights to their experiences as Australian women playwrights. In *Telling Time* Katherine Thomson explicitly examines her past in relation to her imagined future, seeing each as 'composed of two elements — the work one has produced as well as the adjustments one makes to work as a writer' and identifying those elements as 'the ongoing balance of confidence, faith in oneself, clarity to work in a collaborative medium as well as the balancing of isolation with 'being in life'' (Baxter 1996, p. 20). Jenny Kemp identifies her writing as liberating 'the audience from the usual constraints of convention, especially those of time' (Baxter 1996, p. 29). Time in both these authors' experiences plays a constituting role in their sense of being playwrights.

To investigate how Time relates to these and other Australian women playwrights' sense of belonging to a

writing community I want to turn to phenomenology. The beauty of phenomenology as a philosophy is its holistic view of our experience of 'being'. Instead of isolating discrete aspects of situations phenomenology perceives that even as we awaken to consciousness we are already immersed in a socialized and enculturated environment with an already given network of relations of things and others (Hall 1993, pp. 122–140). As the phenomenologist Gilbert-Walsh states, I am already in 'a coherent practical totality with which I am always already familiar and in which I am always already engaged' (Gilbert-Walsh 2010, p. 178). Both Heidegger (1962), in *Being and Time* and Husserl (1990) previously, in a series of lectures on Internal Time Consciousness, understood Time through this lens as the underlying structure of experience and viewed each moment, each 'now', as tri-partite. In each moment I am already projecting myself forward in possibilities, as well as being present, as well as embodying the past as what has already been there for me. Whilst Husserl speaks of this three-dimensionality of the present as the 'thickness' of Time, Heidegger, more analytically terms the past in this present moment as 'mood', the present as 'understanding', and the future in the present as 'discourse'. In these terms 'mood' is the facticity of the world in which we find ourselves, 'understanding' is the choice we make in the moment given that world, and 'discourse' is the means through which we articulate ourselves towards future possibilities.

Considering 'belonging' in relation to this concept of the 'thickness' of Time or its three dimensionality, it is clear that the past is always present, shaping the possibilities for the future. Whilst an ebullience and strong sense of community resonates from both the authors and performers from Playworks in the late 1990s and from the authors analyzed in *The Doll's Revolution* (again following works from the 1990s), these female voices were still only marginally represented in mainstream theatres of that time. In many ways, including their modes of creation, and the styles of their writing, these women stood as deliberately oppositional to the structures of mainstream theatre of the time. Yet Fensham and Varney argue that feminist theatre practices are capable of transforming not just cultural activities concerning theatre and drama, but broader social relations through altering cultural imagination. Thus the vibrancy of these playwrights sense of belonging to an Australian playwriting community can be placed in the three dimensionality of a feminist, oppositional past providing skills and techniques, which can be applied in the present, (that is at that time in the 1990s) and in a belief of transformation into the future. It is a vision for greater presence and representation of Australian women's plays in major theatres as experienced through the three dimensionality of that particular time.

How surprising then to see that in 2012 The Australia Council for the Arts released a report, 'Women in Theatre' (Lally & Miller 2012), documenting the diminished state of representation and support for women in key creative roles, including as playwrights, in major Australian theatre companies over the previous thirty years. The report's qualitative analysis is gathered from Austage for the Major Performing Arts Companies and for Theatre Board Key Organizations. The report incorporates information from over forty interviews with key industry figures, as well as data from the previous thirty years of reports on the issue of women in creative leadership in the theatre sector. Frustration is expressed in the report that the same issues as identified in the 1980s and the 1990s regarding this lack of opportunities for women in creative leadership in the theatre sector are still present and this despite affirmative action policies and greater beliefs in gender equality. The role of Australian women playwrights in comparison to other leadership roles is shown through this report to be particularly low. Only 21% of productions in major companies from 2001-2011 employed a female playwright. Augusta Supple, a Sydney based theatre director, producer, playwright and prolific blogger about theatre issues highlights, at that time, that this lack of employment for women playwrights is despite living 'in a different age of engagement and identification with feminism — where the term 'post feminist' has been accepted by many' (Supple 2010). She

expresses her confusion as to why this is the case. In the same blog Van Badham, award winning playwright and now columnist for *The Guardian Australia* is more caustic, insisting that patriarchy still dominates the theatre sector 'and this ongoing gender misery is not entertaining'.

Here are two of the many highly talented Australian female playwrights sandwiched in a new Time-bound landscape. Although through study and application they have garnered specialized skills and have had successes in their careers through non-major theatre company productions of their work they still regard their future as bleak. Van Badham with a range of awards for her play writing is particularly vocal about her feelings of not belonging at that time in 2010.

My last show in Sydney was a commercial hit that did sold out houses, masses of publicity and great money. But so what? What did that change for a single other woman playwright? No-one in a theatre company lit department turned around and said ... 'better include more women in our next season'. No-one cares. The theatre companies just don't think that maintaining a 50/50 representative balance is important. Girls don't feature in their internal culture, and so girls don't get staged (Supple 2010).

In Heideggerian terms, we can hear Van Badham's mood, from her past she sees herself as being immersed in a masculinist milieu in which her writing is undervalued; we can sense her understanding of where she sits in this situation, she still identifies as a writer of excellence, she is still developing her skills; and we can certainly hear her articulation of the problem, her anger and disdain for the way she and fellow Australian women playwrights are treated because of gender. She references Playworks and the past in the following particular invective against the establishment stating,

And advocating that we change this boys-club culture by organizing away from it is an activism cul-de-sac as well ... because we've been doing this FOR YEARS. We did it with Playworks and now we do it with less money (Supple 2010).

Less money - because Playworks had been funded by the Women's Grants Program of the NSW Department of Women, however when it was amalgamated into Playwriting Australia that kind of financially affirmative action for women was no longer available in the early 2000s. Time has indeed altered the cultural landscape and impacted on a particular community's sense of belonging. In reality the inclusion or lack of it for the work of Australian women playwrights in the mainstream had changed only minimally — fluctuating from a low of 16%. In this different Time of the 2010s, the ongoing lack of representation of women's writing, in Australia's major theatre companies, blocks a hopeful future-in-the-present for these women. Whereas in the 1980s and 90s the hope for greater representations for Australian women playwrights in the mainstream in the future could alter an experience of belonging, by 2010 the certainty of the exclusion of these women's work creates an atmosphere of frustration, a distinct sense of not belonging.

What of now? Examining the 2016 subscriber programs of three major Sydney theatre companies offers a small, window of clarity as to the inclusion of the work of Australian women playwrights in the Australian theatre mainstream in the present. How has 'thick' Time played with a sense of belonging for these writers at least in NSW?

Fourteen plays make up the Sydney Theatre Company program for 2016, this is in comparison to thirteen plays for Belvoir St Theatre and seven for Griffin Theatre, which of the three companies is the only one exclusively committed to Australian writing. Sydney Theatre Company has three full-length plays by Australian women writers, whilst a fourth production consists of five, twenty-minute short plays, each by an Australian female playwright. This constitutes 44% of the works presented by the company coming from women. Clearly Sydney Theatre Company has responded to the recommendations of the 'Women in Theatre' report and their board and senior management have altered their programming substantially. In comparison Belvoir St. Theatre has four plays out of its thirteen productions written by Australian women playwrights with a fourth production as an evening with Hannah Gadsby, a standup comedian. In percentage terms this is 38% of the year's presented work. Griffin Theatre offers only one play, by Alana Valentine, as a sole Australian female playwright, but it does also have a more experimental collectively created production, conceived by Karen Therese, an Australian theatre-maker. These contribute to 28% of Griffin's presented work, which is not so very different from the 21% highlighted by the 'Women in Theatre' report from five years earlier.

The playwrights from these three companies in 2016 are women that most Australians involved in the theatre sector would recognize: Lally Katz, Alana Valentine, Hannie Rayson, Angela Betzien, Nakkiah Lui, Melissa Bubnik, some newcomers to having their work in the mainstream, others long-timers. There is a different cultural landscape again. What has been their experience as playwrights of being 'thrown' into a new set of cultural expectations.

Of these playwrights, some of whom were receiving commissions of work from major companies even as the 'Women in Theatre' report was being released, Angela Betzien is one who has commented on the gender differential in employment in relation to her own sense of being a writer. In an interview for *The Australian* in 2012 (July 21), when employed by the Melbourne Theatre Company to create her work, *Helicopter* (2012), Betzien expresses surprise at being offered the job, when as she says 'opportunities for new Australian works appear much diminished'. She attributes 'creative confidence' as being a powerful force in enabling playwrights to gain work, stating, 'If you have mentors who believe in you, you will take all kinds of creative risks'. Then she contends that men have more of this confidence and that women often have too little creative confidence 'to go knocking on doors to get a job'. The inference that women have been deprived of professional mentorship is clear. Here is an experience, altering in each moment the possibilities of the future. A writer with previous commissions and mentors can garner a strong sense of belonging in the present, in Heidegger's terms contributing to an aspect of mood. The sense of the past plays into the present, the lack of mentorship altering not just the confidence in championing one's own creative work but perhaps undermining at each moment the ability to even write.

Hannie Rayson, who since the success of her play, *Hotel Sorrento*, in 1990 has been regarded as one of Australia's significant playwrights, also writes about creative confidence. In an article in *The Age* in 2016 (December 31, p. 10), when working on her sixteenth play, she differentiates herself from younger playwrights confiding whimsically that whilst her 'greatest professional regret is that she ever thought doubt was useful', she is still not ready 'to embrace the Millennial's zest for self-regard'. Rayson speaks wryly of all the wounding comments that critics have made of her work over the years as feeding her self-doubt, a rumination that perhaps can only be considered publicly now Rayson has achieved success. Here is a major Australian playwright, who understands that she belongs to the Australian women's playwriting community, yet she offers her audience a more subtle understanding of what she has been confronting over the years and how Time has altered this for a new generation.

So can the women achieving success in the now, experience Time differently? The grab line for Melissa Bubnic's 2015 successful show at the Sydney Theatre Company, *Boys Will be Boys* is, 'A cast of five women in a play directed by a woman and written by a woman shouldn't be something that makes theatrical headlines in 2015, but it does' (STC Season 2016). In an interview for the ABC's Radio National Melissa Bubnic speaks about women negotiating male power structures and the problems of the theatre world where although women's writing is produced, it is more frequently presented in smaller theatres. She laughs as she tells Melanie Tate, 'I tend to think that the entire world is a boy's club kind of world' (STC Magazine 2015) and she reveals that her onstage characters are far more courageous than she in speaking out against sexism. The problem that confronts Bubnic is that, as she says, 'So much of being commissioned and getting work is about your personal relationships. It's difficult to risk not being liked'. So the very problem Melissa Bubnic writes about becomes difficult to talk about in the theatre. In the theatre world, as she shares, 'there is no such thing as sexism because we are all open-minded, liberal kind of people'. Here we see Time so clearly shaping being. This relatively new writer to the Australian theatre landscape is in a post-feminist world where she is expected to presume that all her colleagues understand gender issues and stand for equality. However the past-in-the-present tells her otherwise. Bubnic admits that there are times when in the theatre studio she has to 'bite her tongue'. Her understanding in the present is altered. Yet at the same time she accepts her belonging in the Australian women's playwriting landscape, having her Patrick White Playwright award winning play produced at Sydney Theatre Company.

This paper has covered a wide expanse of Time and I realize that it has done so fleetingly. The aim however is to search experience, not rather than data, but to add to data, in order to flesh out what is happening for people in a particular community, that of Australian women playwrights over the past thirty years. The journey from the nineties to now needs to embrace the pasts and the possible futures of Australian women playwrights in their experiences of their creativity and to recognize the role that Time plays with the concept of feelings of belonging or not belonging for and to this cultural group. The possibilities of their creative work being seen and by whom keep changing, altering the ways in which these highly creative women view themselves in their work. There is nothing straightforward about it. Although the balance may be shifting in terms of the productions we see, which may be equally written by women as by men, an inner landscape of self-understanding for this community is a more complex issue, where the past lingers and future possibilities fluctuate.

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